

Suvidya

JOURNAL OF PHILOSOPHY AND RELIGION



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Delineation of Zoroastrianism and Parsi Culture in the Fiction of Rohinton Mistry

Ms. P.Vetri Selvi*

Abstract

In the process of entertaining the people of the time, literature reflects social realities and the society at large. It captures the conflicts and the struggles of the people to preserve it for posterity. Indian Literature is an expression of its people, their cultures, their traditions and their ways of life. Contemporary Indian writing in English, with its post-colonial brand name, is gaining momentum and wide prevalence throughout the world. Rohinton Mistry is one of the pre-eminent writers of the post colonialist writing movement whose writings are diasporic in nature, which is one of the popular themes of post-colonial literature. His works include three novels, *Such a Long Journey*, *A Fine Balance*, *Family Matters* and a short story collection, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*. His writings bear a strong inclination towards Parsis and their culture. Though Rohinton Mistry now lives in Canada, he writes very little about Canada itself. Instead, he focuses almost exclusively on India, and on the state of the Parsi community within that country. Even when he writes about Canada in his short stories, he often represents the migrated land as the site of a Parsi diaspora, a place where immigrant Parsis search for their identities. He captures in his novels the life and struggle for survival of the Parsi community.

Zoroastrianism is the oldest world religion founded by Zarathushtra in Persia, the modern-day Iran. It was once the religion of the Persian Empire, but has since been reduced in numbers to fewer than 200,000 today. The followers of the faith are better known as Parsis. Though Zoroastrianism was never as aggressively monotheistic as Judaism or Islam, it does

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represent an original attempt at unifying under the worship of **one supreme god**. The religion is polytheistic comparable to those of the ancient Greeks, Latins, Indians, and other early peoples. The Zoroastrian sacred text is the *Avesta* (“Book of the Law”), a fragmentary collection of sacred writings. Compiled over many centuries, the *Avesta* was not completed until Persia’s Sassanid dynasty (226-641 AD). It consists of liturgical works with hymns ascribed to Zarathustra (the **Gathas**); invocations and rituals to be used at festivals; hymns of praise; and spells against demons and prescriptions for purification.

Zoroastrians pray to one god Ahura Mazda, meaning the “wise lord”, to help them in the dualistic battle between Spenta Mainyu, the “Bounteous Spirit” and Angra Mainyu, the “Destructive Spirit”. Humans are free to follow either spirit but, according to whether they commit good or bad deeds, are finally responsible for their fate.

The Parsis migrated from their homeland Persia (Iran), thousands of years ago to save their religion from the Islamic invasion of Iran. They arrived with their ‘sacred fire’ and sought refuge in India; and settled in Gujarat as fugitives in the 8th century, seeking freedom to practice their faith. They made a pact of understanding with the local ruler of Gujarat, Jadav Rana, who granted them permission to settle down in that place, of course with certain compromises. They include: the Parsi priest explaining their religion to the king, giving up their native language and speaking the local language, exchanging their Persian costumes to that of Indian, holding their wedding procession only in the dark.

In the centuries since the first Zoroastrian refugees arrived in India, the Parsis have integrated themselves in the drapery of which is called “Indian”, while simultaneously maintaining their own customs and traditions, to which they feel bound by the promises rendered in exchange for asylum. This in turn has given the Parsi community a rather peculiar standing - they are Indians in terms of national affiliation, but non-Indians in terms of ethnicity, traditions and customs.

In spite of their considerable and significant contribution to various facets of national life in the Indian subcontinent, little is known about the diminutive community of the Parsis. All the concerns of the community – declining population, state of widows, late marriages, inter-faith marriages, funeral rites, attitude towards girl child, urbanization, alienation, and modernist vs. traditionalist attitude to religion are aptly delineated in the works of Rohinton Mistry, who is a Parsi himself.

Presently if Iranians are asked about Zoroastrians identity, most of them will answer that those people are fire worshipers and like Jews and other pagans are unclean people. In western countries too, the people are not quite familiar with Zoroastrian philosophy. When they are heard of Zarathustra, they are reminded of “Thus Spoke Zarathustra,” written by the celebrated German philosopher, Nietzsche. Therefore, it can be rightly said that Zoroastrian philosophy, which was the main religious belief system of ancient Iranians and for about several hundred years was the basis of the Iranian culture and their life style, now is almost forgotten. Rohinton Mistry portrays the rich Parsi tradition in all his novels in order to facilitate the non-parsi people to fathom this age old Zoroastrian culture, in order to recognize the truth of such a rich philosophical faith, which has been the foundation of the ancient Iranian civilization, and thus try to repudiate any incorrect pre-judgements against it.

Zoroastrians build Fire Temples as places of worship. There are three grades of Fire Temples: Atash Behram, Atash Adaram, Agyary or Dar-e-Mehar and Atash dadgah or the house hold fire in every Zoroastrian home. The holiest Fire Temple in India is the Atash Behram at Udvada, about one hundred miles from Bombay, where the Sacred Fire brought by Iranian refugees from Iran has been continuously burning since 1741. The earliest Fire temple in India is the Atash Behram at Sanjan believed to have been consecrated around 790AD. The **sacred fire** must be kept burning continually and has to be fed at least five times a day. Prayers are also recited five times a day. The founding of a new fire involves a very elaborate ceremony. There are also rites for purification and for regeneration of a fire. Mistry gives a detailed picture of the Fire Temple in almost all his

works: “Even as a child, Mehroo had adored going to the fire- temple. She loved its smells, its tranquility, its priests in white performing their elegant, mystical rituals. Best of all she loved the inner sanctuary, the sanctum sanctorum, dark and mysterious, with marble floor and marble walls, which only the officiating priest could enter, to tend to the sacred fire burning in the huge, shining silver *afargaan* on its marble pedestal. She felt in their dance of life, seeing the sparks fly up the enormous dark resembling the sky. It was her own private key to the universe, somehow making less frightening the notions of eternity and infinity.”¹

A child born of Zoroastrian parents is not considered a Zoroastrian till he is initiated into the fold by the *Navjote* ceremony. The word *Navjote* means a new initiate who could offer Zoroastrian prayers. The ceremony of initiation consists of the investiture of the child with the sacred shirt called *Sudreh* and a sacred thread called *Kusti*. The *Navjote* ceremony is performed at the age of seven or nine or eleven, up to fifteen. Therefore, the child continues to wear the *Sudreh* and *Kusti* and perform the *Kusti* ritual with the prescribed prayers, throughout life. The *Sudreh* is made of pure, white muslin or cotton while the *Kusti* is woven of seventy-two threads of fine lamb’s wool. The word *Kusti* means a waist band. Being tied thrice round the waist, it points to the trinity of good thoughts good words, good deeds. These form a barrier insulating the individual from all that is evil. Once a child has had the *Navjote* performed, he or she is spiritually responsible for his or her own salvation through an observance of the morality and rituals of the religion. In ***Such a Long Journey*** there is a scene where Mistry explains how to do *Kusti* prayers. “He recited the appropriate sections and unknotted the *Kusti* from around his waist. When he had unwound all nine feet of its slim, sacred, hand-woven length, he cracked it, whip-like: once, twice, thrice. And thus was Ahriman, the evil one, driven away- with that expert flip of the wrist, possessed only by those who performed their *Kusti* regularly.”²

Mistry is very proud of his oldest religion and he says that all the other religions are influenced by his own. We could find many similar rituals in other religions like the Parsis praying to their God facing east like the

Muslims, their tying of *Kusti* resembles the *poonal* of Hindu Brahmins, the tying and untying of this during *Kusti* prayers resemble the *sandhyavandana* prayers of the Hindus and praying five times a day reminds us of the Muslims. But according to Mistry, the other religions have taken few rituals from the age old Zoroastrianism. He goes on arguing that his religion is the oldest. He compares Christ with the Zarathustra in the following lines. "...our prophet Zarathustra lived more than fifteen hundred years before your Son of God was even born; a thousand years before the Buddha; two hundred years before Moses. And do you know how much Zoroastrianism influenced Judaism, Christianity, and Islam?"³ Most religious historians also believe that the Jewish, Christian and Muslim beliefs concerning God and Satan, the soul, heaven and hell, the virgin birth of the savior, slaughter of the innocents, resurrection, the final judgment, etc. were all derived from Zoroastrianism.

Parsis prefer only fair skinned. According to them, only the low caste *ghatis* are dark skinned. In *A Fine Balance* Nusswan's wife Ruby is dismissed by her husband's grandfather just because she is little dark in colour. This is reiterated in the *Tales from Firozsha Baag* thus: "...Parsis like light skin, and when Parsi baby is born that is the first and most important thing. If it is fair they say, O how nice light skin just like parents. But if it is dark skin they say, *arre what is this ayah no chhokro, ayah's child.*"⁴

Each community has its own rituals especially during the times of birth, marriage, and death. Other Parsi writers like Bapsi Sidhwa and Boman Desai give elaborate description of Parsi marriage ceremonies in their works but Mistry does not give a detailed description of the Parsi wedding rituals in his works. Though few weddings are portrayed like Nariman's marriage with Jasmine Contractor in *Family Matters* and Dina Dalal's marriage in *A Fine Balance*, Mistry does not elaborate on them.

Zoroastrianism, rather the Parsis who practice it, is against Inter-caste marriages. Purity, in fact, is central to the Parsi ethos. Parsis believe in keeping their race pure, and frown on intermarriage. Orthodox Parsis believe in excommunicating Parsis who marry outside of the clan. *Family*

Matters charts the effects of religious bigotry and rigid traditionalism as they work their insidious way through generations of a family. In the prime of his life Nariman Vakeel was compelled by his parents and their orthodox Parsi circle to give up the woman he loved, a non-Parsi Goan, and marry the more appropriate Yasmin, a widow with two children. In the same novel the highly religious Yezad is suspicious about his son's love towards a non-Parsi girl he goes wild and he tries various dialogues to make his son fall in line with him. "...the League had discussed the 1818 case of a Parsi bigamist – married a non Parsi. "For his crime he was excommunicated by the Panchayat," said Daddy, raising his hand to signify the gravity of the punishment."⁵

Mistry plays a double role. Though he wants to protect the dying religion of his, he is always against the orthodox Parsis and he gives a subtle remark against their purity business through Murad in *Such a Long Journey*: "He says that perhaps the League of Orthodox Parsis could invent a Purity Detector, along the lines of the airport metal detector, which would go beep-beep-beep when an impure person walked through...I think bigotry is certainly to be laughed at."⁶

Whereas Intermarriages are not tolerated by them, Widow Remarriages are permissible in the Parsi society like that of Nariman Vakeel in *Family Matters* marrying Yasmin Contractor, the widowed lady with two children, and the offer for Dina Dalal, the young widow in *A Fine Balance* for a second marriage which she eventually turns down. Her brother tries to convince her thus: "Do you know how fortunate you are in our community? Among the unenlightened, widows are thrown away like garbage. If you were a Hindu, in the old days you would have had to be a good little sati and leap onto your husband's funeral pyre, be roasted with him."⁷

Parsis are great lovers of good food. "Someone chuckled loudly that where Parsis were concerned, food was number one, conversation came second."⁸ The Parsis consume a variety of non-vegetarian food, including the Indian Hindu's sacred Cow. "Lucky for us that we are minorities in a nation of Hindus. Let them eat their pulses and grams and beans, spiced

with their stingy asafetida- what they call hing. Let them fart their lives away...we will get our protein from their sacred cow.”⁹

Parsis are known for their family affection. Every Parsi family is close knit even when there are sufferings, which normally humans cannot withstand. Parsi Psyche permits acceptance of sacrifice in the name of family bond, a reference to which the following incidents are quoted. From the vantage point Roxana in *Family Matters* was able to watch the scene: “...nine year-old happily feeding seventy-nine... She felt she was witnessing something almost sacred, and her eyes refused to relinquish the precious moment, for she knew instinctively that it would become a memory to cherish, to recall in difficult times when she needed strength.”¹⁰

Mistry portrays the Parsi women to be docile beings, real homemakers and sacrificing mothers. Dilnavaz, Gustad Noble’s wife in *Such a Long Journey* is portrayed in the novel as busily cooking or filling water. As a responsible mother, she could even conspire with Miss Kutpitia, the spinster in the neighbourhood in creating spells for her family’s well-being. She is so concerned for her husband and children that she succumbs to Ms. Kutpitia’s *jadu-mantar* and does everything with limes, chillies and even with lizard’s tails. In *Family Matters*, Roxana is a typical Parsi woman with a typical Indian spirit. She loves her family and devotes her entire self to cater to their needs. Almost all the women characters portrayed in the novels of Rohinton Mistry are home lovers and are not earning members except for Dina Dalal in *A Fine Balance*. She moves from a protected girlhood under her father to the harsh reality of reductive femaleness under the protection of her brother.

Mistry is anxious about the Parsi youth of today. His works also highlights Parsi idiosyncrasies and bloody-mindedness. Among Indians, Parsis have got not undeserved reputation for eccentricity and even testiness. He uses Dr. Fitter in *Family Matters* to mouth his opinion: “Parsi men of today were useless, dithering idiots, the race had deteriorated. When you think of our forefathers, the industrialists and shipbuilders who established the foundation of modern India, the philanthropists who gave

us our hospitals and schools and libraries and bags, what luster they brought to our community and the nation”.¹¹

Mistry also draws the reader’s attention to several men and women of Parsi community remaining unmarried or single even at an advanced age. Many men and women remain thus like Jal, Coomy, Daisy in *Family Matters*, Ms. Kutpitia, Ms. Villie in *Such a Long Journey*. “Mistry makes possible the introduction into the text of hundreds of ageing Parsi single women like Villie, who eke out their lives, looking after ageing parents and at times spice them with harmless little flirtations with men and gambling risks.”¹² Mistry is more concerned about this fact because remaining unmarried would further contribute to the decline in Parsi population.

With dwindling figures looming large and the latest census putting their number merely at a few thousands, Parsis have set up a fertility clinic to preserve — and hopefully expand — their community. The clinic in Mumbai Central is the brainchild of the Bombay Parsi Panchayat, a body officially inaugurated today. It is an attempt to raise awareness among Parsis, especially young couples, about the availability and necessity of fertility treatment. The seriousness of this problem is highlighted in Mistry’s *Family Matters*

Every religion in the world gloats over its way of disposal of the deceased the way they like and practice. The Christians and the Muslims take pride in burying the dead and the Christians remember the dead on 2nd November every year considered as All Soul’s Day. The Hindus prefer cremation. The Parsis neither bury nor cremate. They have a peculiar system of submitting the dead to the mercy of the elements by which long-necked, hairless vultures consume the flesh of the dead in an isolated spot called ‘The Tower of Silence’. The remaining bones are being disposed of. This habit of the Parsis is peculiar to them and cannot be found in any other race. “The Parsi system of disposal of dead bodies is unique... They are exposed to sun’s rays and are offered to birds on the same platform so that a king’s corpse may lie side by side with that of a pauper. All are equal

and no monument is erected to tell the glory of the great as no costly funerals or coffins distinguish the rich and the poor".¹³

Though a long period, of at least three thousand years has elapsed since the time when most of the religious commandments of the Parsis were first issued, and though the community has, during that interval, seen many vicissitudes of fortune, they have adhered well-nigh faithfully to many of their ancient religious customs. Among these, is their custom of the disposal of the dead, which, however peculiar it may appear to the followers of other religions, appears to them to be the most natural and acceptable, supported as it is, even now, by the best scientific test of advanced sanitary science.

In accordance with their religious injunctions, the Parsis build their Towers of Silence on the tops of hills if available. No expense is spared in constructing them of the hardest and the best materials, with a view that they may last for centuries without the possibility of polluting the earth or contaminating any living beings dwelling thereon. "However distant may be the home of a deceased person, whether rich or poor, high or low in rank, he has always a walking funeral — his body is carried to the Tower of Silence on an iron bier by official corpse-bearers and is followed in procession by the mourners, relatives and friends, dressed in white flowing full-dress robes, walking behind in pairs and each couple joined hand in hand by holding a white handkerchief between them in token of sympathetic grief."¹⁴

Mistry expends several pages over these death rites in his novels. Dinshawji's and Major Billimoria's death rites performed in the 'The Tower of Silence' as portrayed in *Such a Long Journey* is an example: "The mourners could see no more. But they knew what would happen inside: the *nassasalers* would place the body on a *pavi*, on the outermost of three concentric stone circles. Then, without touching Dinshawji's flesh, using their special hooked rods they would tear off the white cloth. Every stitch, till he was exposed to the creatures of the air, naked as the day he had entered the world."¹⁵

Mistry writes with black humour in *Such a Long Journey* on the vultures which eat Parsi corpses and the debate in the community between the reformists and the orthodox, whom he refers to as ‘the vulturists’ and the opposing group who objected to such disposal methods of the dead. Mistry uses this chance to comment on the disposal method of the dead. “The orthodox defence was the age-old wisdom that it was a pure method, defiling none of the God’s good creations: earth, water, air and fire...But the reformists, who favoured cremation, insisted that the way of the ancients, was unsuitable for the twentieth century. Such a ghoulish system, they said, ill became a community with a progressive reputation and a forward-thinking attitude.”¹⁶

Mistry also gives some of his findings of the Parsi society like he says that Parkinsonism and Osteoporosis are prevalent diseases in the society. . There is some evidence, too, that they have particularly high incidences of mental illness and haemophilia, both perhaps exacerbated by their defensiveness as a community and some degree of inbreeding. He uses Kersi in his short story to voice out his views. “That’s what osteoporosis does, hollows out the bones and turns effect into cause. It has an unusually high incidence in the Parsi community, he said, but did not say why. Just one of those mysterious things. We are the chosen people where osteoporosis is concerned”.¹⁷

Mistry along with some of the other Parsi diasporic writers like Bapsi Sidhwa, Farokh Dhondy, Firdaus Kanga, Dina Mehta and Boman Desai has succeeded in making the minority Parsi community visible to the mainstream culture of India and to the world. As Bharucha notes in the book *Indian English Fiction 1980-1990: An Assessment*: “ These texts as such are making a ‘last grand stand’, asserting the glorious Persian part, the Indian connection and finally the more recent western experience. This discourse also deals with the increasing tensions between the Parsi minority and the dominant section of Indian society.”¹⁸

The contribution of writers of fiction like Mistry opens a window on Parsis in India for their Canadian and other western readers. His account

of the Bombay Parsi community and its travails is the favourite subject of Mistry's Canadian-Indian fiction in English on which he concentrates in all the three fictional works of his. His fiction tells us more about the Parsi community in Bombay than a book of sociology possibly could. Mistry is able to project the emotional life and personal relationships of the Parsis as a valuable part of the wider human experience at the international level by writing about these things from across the worlds. Jaydipsinh Dodiya observes: "The Parsi writers are also sensitive to the various anxieties felt by their community. Rohinton Mistry has demonstrated this in responding to the existing threats to the Parsi family and community, and also to the country. He presents his community through the different narratives of his characters who invariably express their concern for their community and the changes that affect their community."¹⁹

Mistry's works provide authentic and scholarly insights into the Zoroastrian faith and some of its tenets. Further, it attempts to explore the distinctive character of the Parsi men of the current era in India. Rohinton Mistry entertains while he exposes the frailties of his characters with his gentle humour. It reveals that this minority community has to cope with hegemonic forces, identity crises and the struggle to create its own space. It is hard to accept the fact that the age-old Parsi community is facing its extinction. All the concerns of the community—declining population, brain-drain, late marriages, inter-faith marriages, funeral rites, attitude to the girl-child, urbanization, alienation, modernist vs. traditionalist attitude to religion and the existence or non-existence of ethnic anxieties, marginalization of the Parsis in the recent years, dilution of values, isolation in the urban scenario and the influence of massive commercialization—are aptly delineated in the works of the Rohinton Mistry.

End Notes

- ¹ Rohinton Mistry, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, Faber and Faber, London, 1987, p.12, 13.
- ² Rohinton Mistry, *Such a Long Journey*, Faber and Faber, London, 1991, p.5.
- ³ Ibid, p.28.

- ⁴ Rohinton Mistry, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, p.46.
- ⁵ Rohinton Mistry, *Family Matters*, Faber and Faber, Noida, 2003, p.466.
- ⁶ Ibid, p.486.
- ⁷ Rohinton Mistry, *A Fine Balance*, Random House Inc, New York, 1996, p.52.
- ⁸ Ibid, p.38.
- ⁹ Rohinton Mistry, *Such a Long Journey*, p.27.
- ¹⁰ Rohinton Mistry, *Family Matters*, p.113.
- ¹¹ Ibid, p.51.
- ¹² Nilufer E. Bharucha, *Ethnic Enclosures And Transcultural Spaces*, Rawal Publications, Jaipur, 2003, p. 183.
- ¹³ Narendra Kumar, *Parsee Novel*, Prestige Books, New Delhi, 2002, p.26.
- ¹⁴ Jer Dara Randeria, *The Parsi mind: a Zoroastrian asset to culture*, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, Michigan, 1993, p.127.
- ¹⁵ Rohinton Mistry, *Such a Long Journey*, p.301.
- ¹⁶ Ibid, p.374.
- ¹⁷ Rohinton Mistry, *Tales from Firozsha Baag*, p.230.
- ¹⁸ Nilufer E. Bharucha, 'The Parsi Voice in Recent Indian English Fiction: An Assertion of Ethnic Identity', *Indian English Fiction 1980-1990:An Assessment*, Eds,NiluferE.Bharucha & Vilas Sarang, B.R.Publishers,Delhi,1994, p.43.
- ¹⁹ Jaydipsinh Dodiya, *The Fiction of Rohinton Mistry: Critical Studies*, Prestige Books, New Delhi, 1998, p. 93.